

Historical Note:

From Stoneyford, County Antrim to Coleraine, Australia: Samuel Connor, MD

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Samuel Connor was born on 17 June 1861, the fourth son of John Connor, a Presbyterian, and prosperous tenant-farmer, from Stoneyford, County Antrim. The latter's brother was a medical practitioner in Newry, County Down and it was he who persuaded his nephew and namesake to adopt medicine as a career. The article is divided into an autobiographical account of Connor's minority, written on 3 May 1882, on board the 'Superb', an emigrant vessel, bound for Melbourne, Australia, and a brief description of Connor's career in the Victorian country town of Coleraine. The former provides a glimpse of the life of the strong farming class in Ulster, as well as an interesting perspective on medical student life and career prospects in Ireland in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, while the latter suggests the possibilities of contemporary practice in the Australian colony of Victoria.¹

"In looking back over the years of my childhood and youth I can remember events that happened when I was four years old. I have a distinct recollection of my first years at school when I was first introduced to my ABC's. My schoolmaster, Mr Atkinson, was a small, delicate, middle-aged, man, with a short temper and a partiality for flogging on the slightest occasion. We could tell of a morning by looking at the master's face what sort of a day we were going to have. Our lot would have been much more miserable had it not been for his wife, the schoolmistress. She was as unlike her husband as she well could be. She was over the medium height, fat, fair and forty, had a good temper and was kind to the pupils under her charge. She often acted the part of mediator between the angry master and the unfortunate pupil, so if a blessing descends on the peacemakers, blessed is she ! Mr and Mrs Atkinson were assisted in their charge by their daughter, Ella, who acted as monitress (now married to a Joseph Connor and assisting her husband to teach in Stoneyford National School, where her father used to teach)."

"As soon as I was able to make myself useful I was accustomed to assist my father on the farm, outside school hours. I remember the death of my elder brother, John, in his eighth year, I being then six years old (1867). The cause of his death I don't know."

"During the summer and autumn months, when my father was buying or selling off his stock, I was in the habit of attending fairs with him. If he were buying I drove the cattle home and if selling I drove them to the fair and kept them there

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till sold. If the drove was large of course I had help but as a rule I was alone. Practice makes perfect and in time I acquired the reputation of being a firm, able drover. Many a sixpence I have received from my grandfather (Mr McClure) and uncle George Connor for helping with their cattle. But they are both gone long since to that bourne from whence no traveller returns. 'Requiescat in Pace'. The principal fairs which I attended were Belfast, Lisburn, Hillsborough, Dromore, Crumlin, Antrim and Oldstone."

"Although this life was very pleasant and I enjoyed perfect health, it had its drawbacks, for example, all kinds of weather had to be faced, sometimes early starts in the morning, and after trudging over dirty roads, standing for hours on stony pavements, possibly in the rain, was not so pleasant. I have a vivid recollection of receiving on one occasion a number of lashes from a horsewhip for deserting my charge in a fair. It happened thus. We had drove of about twenty cows in Hillsborough fair, a couple of servants and myself keeping them in position, I asked my father's permission to leave for a little while to get something to eat (I had a splendid appetite in those days). In my absence the cattle became troublesome and my father had to lend a hand himself. I was surprised on going back to receive the whip around my shoulders and to hear the expression, "take that for going away without leave". Father had forgotten in the excitement that I had asked and obtained leave."

"In the course of time I grew tired of my life at home and asked my father to send me to a good school, my younger brother, George, taking my place in assisting father. On May 1st 1875, I left Stoneyford to attend the Royal Academical Institution, Belfast, the largest and best school in the town. I stopped here for eighteen months, going home as a rule once a week or once a fortnight and enjoying it very much. I was very lazy and spent more of my time over cricket, football, lacrosse etc. than my books. The result was that I left the academy without taking a single prize or making my mark in any way. During this time I suffered two very heavy losses. In March 1876 my grandmother died at a ripe old age and on 25th June of same year my dear mother died after a week's illness (pleurisy the doctors said was the cause). Not long after this when in Newry, my uncle, Dr Samuel Connor, Sr, advised me to go to college at once and prepare for the medical profession. In a weak moment I consented and accordingly left the R. A. Inst. for Queen's College in the same term (Nov. 1st 1876)."

"At that time I was unable to pass the matriculation or entrance examination of the college, as I had no intention of leaving school so soon and had made no preparation for it. So I entered college as a non-matriculated student, a step which I regretted very much afterwards for two reasons, first non-matriculated students cannot compete for prizes and second I was postponing work to a time when I had sufficient to do without it."

"I had the good fortune to meet at college George Thompson, a medical student, to whom I was introduced by our mutual friend, Mr David Cunningham, of whom more anon. During this first winter session, George and I chummed together, that is to say we occupied the same lodgings, read the same books and were constant companions. We attended at college the following lectures, anatomy, physiology, zoology, French and chemistry. In April 1877, after my first session was over my uncle Sam (who has a large drug shop in Newry)

advised that I should go for a year to his shop, to learn the appearance, composition etc. of the different drugs. I went on the 16th of April and stopped till the following March. While in Newry I had to do the most menial work of the shop, measuring oils, paints, manures etc. and acquiring about as much knowledge of drugs as I would have learned in a month at college. In the early part of my stay in Newry, I spent a couple of evenings in the week reading Greek and Latin with the Rev. Mr Adair, preparing for the matriculation examination, but after a short time I grew tired of him and stopped attending his class."

"Then I joined an elocution class conducted by Mr W. Pyper of Belfast which was held once a week and when the class was brought to a close I appeared for the first time on any stage, in a short comedy. On that occasion, I remember being very uncomfortable and was told afterwards that I presented anything but a courageous front, my face changing from white to red and from red to white during the performance. While in Newry I was a member of the Presbyterian Young Men's Christian Association and on one occasion made a short speech in a debate, but I am sorry to say it was not brilliant. I was only home once during the eleven months spent in Newry and that was on the day of my grandfather's funeral (Summer 1877). Although I was treated very kindly by my uncle's family and all Newry friends I was very glad to escape from the place and return to Belfast again, where I renewed my medical studies. My outlook at that time was very gloomy. I had forgotten the greater part of what I had learned in the first session and had two examinations to pass before the next winter session commenced, the matriculation and first university examination. Now any one of these was enough to prepare for in the six months at my disposal, but I made up my mind to try them both and have them over me. So I took a couple of summer lectures at the college (botany and experimental physics), at the same time reading one hour each day with a grinder, Rev. W. O'Neil."

"Time passed quickly, the examinations were drawing nigh and I very imperfectly prepared. The first university examination came first (Sept. 1878). It was held in Exhibition Palace, Dublin and lasted about a week. Imagine my delight one morning to receive at my lodging in Belfast a telegram to the effect that I had passed. Now I sat down to read for the matriculation examination which was to follow in about a fortnight (October) at Queen's College, Belfast. I was fortunate also in passing it."

"I was now a matriculated student of the college, entering on my second year and at length on an equal footing with men of my year. I attended the following lectures, anatomy, physiology and materia medica at the college and commenced to walk the wards of the Belfast Royal Hospital. It was at the beginning of this session that I got introduced to Augustine Henry, MA, a distinguished student of Queen's College Galway, who had come to Belfast to study medicine and read for the best prize our college could give, the Dunville Studentship, value £145, which he afterwards gained. I enjoyed the pleasure of Mr Henry's society during the greater part of that winter as we lodged together (my old chum, George Thompson, did not stop in lodgings that year but lived with Mr D. Cunningham), Mr Henry was the best read man I met in my whole college course and was of great assistance to me in explaining any difficult point that cropped up. At the end of the session (April 1879) I obtained a couple of prizes, that is fourth place in anatomy and physiology, fifth place in materia medica. In the summer session (May to July 1879) I attended one class at the

college, practical chemistry, and the Royal Hospital at the same time, reading steadily for the second university examination, which came off in the following September. I took a prize in practical chemistry at the end of the course and then retired to the country for a little, to stay with brother William who was very ill. He died on August 30th 1879, aged 25 years, after an illness of about 5 years (phthisis). As the time for the examination came round, Mr Henry and I repaired to Dublin to have a final cram before it came off. Mr Henry got first class honours but I was well satisfied with simple pass. Another stumbling block was removed from my path and I came home rejoicing."

"On November 1st 1879 I returned to Belfast and commenced my third year. This session I stopped again with Mr Henry but in different lodgings, and attended lectures on anatomy, physiology and surgery, also the Royal Hospital. I did not read so hard as formerly because I had no examination for a considerable time. As the fourth and final examination is the most difficult of the series, more time is given for preparation and no one, however clever, is allowed to enter for it before the end of fourth winter session, thus giving two years between the last two examinations."

"At the end of this session (April 1881) I obtained a prize in surgery. In summer session of 1881, I attended two classes, midwifery and medical jurisprudence, in both of which I secured a prize. When the college was closed I took a trip to London to see my brother Joseph, and the first city in the world. When there I got impressed with the immensity of the city, saw a number of its sights, such as museums, art galleries, exhibition palaces, theatres etc. I went to the House of Commons and sat up all night, from 11 pm on 26th inst. till 7 am on 27th August, listening to an Irish debate. After stopping a week in London I turned my face once more towards the home of my fathers and first gem of the sea, Auld Erin. In the month of October following I paid a short visit to my college friend, George Thompson at Croagh, County Tyrone."

"On November 1st 1880 I commenced my fourth and last year at Queen's College, attended lectures on practice of medicine and demonstrations of anatomy. I also attended the Royal Hospital and the Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. This winter I stopped with George Thompson (Mr Henry being in London) and read steadily through the whole session as the final examination was drawing near. At the end of this session (April 1881), I obtained first prize in the class of practice of medicine and immediately after went to Newry to help my uncle Sam for a fortnight, as his principal assistant was ill. Returning again to Belfast, George Thompson and I agreed to spend the summer months in Holywood, a seaside place, four miles from Belfast, going by train every morning to town to attend hospitals. Here I spent some of the pleasantest days I ever had in my life. We spent at least three hours a day taking a dip in the briny and strolling about through beautiful lanes enjoying the beauties of nature. During the rest of the day we read hard. The only event which occurred to sadden my stay here was the death of my dear and only sister, Eliza, which took place on May 27th 1881 after a long illness (phthisis), aged about sixteen years. Getting tired at length of this peaceful existence in Holywood, George and I removed our abode to dear dirty Dublin on August 1st. From this till the examination came off (Sept. and Oct.) we attended Dr Stoker's class and met every day a large number of students preparing for the same ordeal as ourselves. The terrible examination at length commenced. Then followed three

weeks of great mental strain and anxiety, such as I never wish to experience again. However our trouble was not for nought. George Thompson and I both satisfied the examiners, eleven in all, and obtained the degree of MD or Doctor of Medicine, becoming involved in the twinkling of an eye from the chrysalis state of studentship into the full-blown butterfly yclept 'Doctor'. George received in addition the diplomas of MCh (Master of Surgery) and LM (Licentiate in Midwifery). I got MD and LM only. Dr Thompson and I came back with flying colours. Here we parted for a time, he going home to Croagh, I to Stoneyford. A few days after reaching home I had occasion to go to Queen's College, Belfast, to return some books which I had borrowed from the library, when I saw in the Hall a notice from one of the professors (Dr Reid) offering a fully qualified man the post of assistant to a friend of his in the country. I called upon Dr Reid and obtained a letter of introduction to his friend, Dr McBride of Gilford, County Down. I went, was accepted and at once commenced duty in Gilford. Dr McBride had a very large practice, so there was plenty of work for me to do."

"I liked Gilford fairly well. My expenses were few and I experienced for the first time the pleasure of receiving money earned by my own industry. The doctor's family consisted of one son (a medical man and an invalid), an only daughter, a distant relative, Miss Mitchell and four servants, my favourite being Miss Mitchell, a very clever little girl of twelve years. On March 3rd 1882, I went to Croagh to pay Dr Thompson a short visit. While there I received a letter from brother Joseph, offering me the post of surgeon to 'Superb', bound from London to Melbourne and sailing on the 10th inst. I telegraphed, accepting the offer, and returned to Gilford to tell Dr McBride and pack up my property. On March 7th, I left Gilford, after a sojourn of four months, reached home about mid-day, stopped a few hours and then set out for London via Belfast, Fleetwood and Birmingham. I stopped one night in Birmingham in Queen's Hotel, saw brother Joseph who is now living in that town and who came to London and Gravesend to see me off."

Connor did not disclose publicly his reasons for migrating to Australia. Members of his family had already settled there, among them his uncle, Joseph H. Connor, who represented Geelong in the Legislative Assembly of Victoria. He may have accepted the position of ship's surgeon to gain professional experience. He may simply have wished to travel. Whatever his motivation and intention, Connor was destined to spend the remainder of his working life in the antipodes. The 'Superb' docked in Melbourne on Sunday 11 June 1882, after being at sea for ninety-three days, and Samuel lodged with his uncle's family in Geelong. On the day he celebrated his twenty-first birthday, less than a week after his arrival in the colony, Connor heard that Dr Foster of Colac wanted an assistant, at a salary of £150 per annum. He was offered and accepted the position but, on the advice of his friend, Dr Warren of Richmond, refused to sign an undertaking that he would not practice within a twenty-five mile radius of Colac for a period of ten years following the completion of his contract. Instead, he applied for a junior hospital position in Sydney and also met a representative of the people of Coleraine, in the Western District of Victoria, who were in urgent need of a doctor and who were prepared to provide him with certain financial guarantees. Connor was more attracted to Sydney and decided to go there to canvas personally. He called on Presbyterian ministers, medical practitioners and businessmen but, after about ten days, realised that it was useless to

proceed any further, 'as so many people had their fingers in the pie'. Instead he returned to Coleraine and accepted the Coleraine offer on being informed that it was still open.¹

Thirty-eight residents of the town and neighbourhood guaranteed Connor an income of £400 if he practised there for twelve months. If he left before that time he was subject to a penalty of £50. If he wished to leave after the contracted period he was obliged to give one month's written notice. Connor was to adopt the 'usual scale' of fees and to keep proper accounts, which were to be audited after six months and on termination of the agreement.²

With the exception of an eleven months' sojourn in Geelong, Connor practised in Coleraine for the remainder of his life. Paid and honorary appointments rapidly came his way. He became a Medical Officer of Health, public vaccinator and analyst. He was gazetted surgeon to the militia, acted as surgeon to the Oddfellows' Lodge and to the Sons of Temperance and was elected honorary surgeon to Hamilton Hospital. Such a career pattern was fairly typical of the majority of Australian country doctors, hospital appointments in particular being enormously significant in establishing a successful practice. Connor's earnings over his first ten years of practice consistently outstripped the guarantee he had been given when he came to Coleraine. For the eight years 1885-1892 his average annual earnings were £723, and for the five years 1888-1892 they averaged £826. Ludwig Bruck, the Melbourne-based medical publisher and bookseller, estimated that in the early 1890s about ninety per cent of Australasian medical practitioners earned between £350 and £1200 a year, with the remainder grossing a maximum of £6000, and that the average for all doctors was probably between £700 and £800. Bruck argued that such an income was not inordinate and was necessary to compensate for higher rents and wages in the colonies and for the loss of social and other advantages that were readily enjoyed 'in the more civilised regions of Europe and America'.³ In monetary terms, therefore, Connor's practice was an 'average' one. However, he was probably better circumstanced than most country doctors, as legacies from Ireland and returns on investments augmented his professional earnings substantially. Connor filled a number of social positions in his adopted town and this again reflected the generally high esteem in which doctors were held in nineteenth century Australia. He was a justice of the peace and was closely involved with the Presbyterian Church and Sunday school, as well as presiding over several educational, social and welfare organisations. He died in Coleraine in September 1927.⁴

This article is largely based on the private papers of Samuel Connor which are in the possession of Merran Samuel, Armdale, Victoria, Australia. I would like to thank her for allowing me to examine and use her grandfather's papers.

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2. Samuel Connor Papers. Manuscript 619. Australian Medical Association Archives, Parkville, Victoria 3053.
3. The present state of the medical profession in Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. Australasian Med Gazette 1893, March p97.
4. Med J Australia, 19 September, 1927: 729-730.

FURTHER NOTES ON DOCTORS MENTIONED

(kindly supplied by Professor R S J Clarke, Honorary Archivist, Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast)

1. *Dr Samuel Connor* – general practitioner, of 39 Hill Street, Newry, Co. Down; LM Belfast Lying-in Hospital 1857; LRCS (Edinburgh) and LM 1858; LAH (Dublin) 1867.
2. *Dr George Matthew Thompson* – general practitioner, was evidently from Croagh (near Castlederg), Co. Tyrone, but became MOH for Bellaghy, Co. Londonderry where he was by 1882; MD, MCh, LM (RUI) 1881; Certificate of the Medico – Psychological Association 1887; DPH (Cambridge) 1889.
3. *Dr Augustine Henry* – Born near Portglenone, Co. Antrim, in 1857. There is no reference to an Augustine Henry in the Medical Registers of the 19th century. This is because he left Belfast in 1878 and went to China as a doctor in the Imperial Maritime Customs, under Sir Robert Hart of Portadown. He became very interested in botany and corresponded extensively with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. This led to his international acknowledgement as a plant collector. After the Boxer rising in 1900 he returned to Europe and made a second reputation with the classic book “The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland”. He helped to found the school of forestry at Cambridge and later became Professor of Forestry in Dublin.
4. *Professor Seaton Reid* – (1811-1896); LRCS (Edinburgh) 1832; MD (Edinburgh) 1833; Consulting Physician at the Belfast General Hospital 1850 – 95; Professor of Materia Medica, QUB, 1857-90.
5. *Dr Henry McBride* – general practitioner, of Gilford, Co. Down. MCh (Glasgow) 1840.
6. *Sir William Thornley Stoker* – (1845-1912), of 16 Harcourt Street and 8 Ely Place, Dublin, Consulting Surgeon at the Richmond Hospital, Dublin; Professor of Anatomy, RCSI, 1876-89 and President, RCSI, 1894-96. He was a brother of Bram Stoker, author of ‘*Dracula*’ and is immortalised in Gogarty’s ‘*As I Was Going Down Sackville Street*’.